

TROY PERRY, GOSPELSLINGER

by Steve Warren, 1987

Troy Perry was a gay activist before the Stonewall rebellion and, God willing, will be one when the AIDS crisis has passed, but by that time his emphasis may have shifted from the spiritual to the political.

"I know anytime I want to translate 'my following' into a political base, I could," he says in response to a like-worded question. "The time has not been right. I do a lot of prayer, and must wait until the right moment, but if and when that time comes, and it will, I'll hit it hard on."

"I happen to be a registered democrat, but I have learned over the years I have friends in both parties," Perry says, explaining why he avoids partisan politics as much as possible.

The Rev. Elder Dr. Troy D. Perry, to use his earned, elective and honorary titles, founded the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Churches (UFMCC) in his Huntington Park, California living room on October 6, 1968. "I didn't view it as a political act at the time," he laughs, "but everybody else does."

"I was just a preacher who had been called to the ministry, and even when I took out my ad (in the Advocate for the first service) it was a political act because I gave my home address. My roommate, Willie Smith, just went off the deep end. He said, 'How crazy can you be! You mean you've taken out an ad in a gay newspaper and gave our home address?... The police are gonna come in and raid it right off the bat.'

I did it out of ignorance. I didn't know you couldn't do things like that. I was starting a church and thinking like a preacher, not even a gay preacher but just a preacher and thinking the way you gotta do it is to let people know where you're at."

The police weren't among the 13 that first service, but showed up some time later when the church had outgrown Perry's living room and was worshipping at the Huntington Park Women's Club. "One day the LAPD showed up out of their jurisdiction," he recalls, "two police officers in plain clothes. They came in and immediately went to the bathroom, the toilet, to hang around. I asked the biggest, burliest usher there to go throw them out and to tell them to either come in for the service or get out of the building. I didn't care which, but to get out of the toilet. They sheepishly got out of the toilet and left."

Backing down from confrontation isn't part of Perry's modus operandi although instigating confrontation in a just cause is. No course in modern gay history is complete without his life story, as detailed in his 1972 autobiography The Lord Is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay. He was born in Tallahassee, Florida, in 1940, and became a Pentecostal preacher when he was 13. He married at 18 and fathered two sons, trying to suppress the homosexuality he had been aware of from the age of five, when "Tarzan turned me on."



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At 23 Perry came out, giving up family and career in the process. He had a difficult time, including a suicide attempt, between finding out who he was and what to do about it.

Perry cites two incidents as central to his political awakening. The first was in 1968. "My gay activism started when a friend of mine was arrested in a gay bar in Los Angeles," he relates. "That sparked my attention to the way the police treated 'lewd and lascivious conduct,' (which no longer is even a law in the state of California). Ten of us loaded up into cars, led by Lee Glaze, the owner of the old Patch, which was a gay bar in Los Angeles. He got up in his bar after the arrests were made and asked if there was a florist there. He bought all the flowers, and loaded down the cars with them."

It was crazy back then, it wasn't politically correct, but it worked. We swept into the police station and Lee said, 'We're here to get our sisters out of jail.' The police officer asked 'Who are your sisters?' and he said, 'Tony Valdez and Bill Hastings.'

They were scared. It was the first time the police did not know how to react. They were used to faggots. They were used to queers. They were used to pansies.

"That started me and one thing led to another--and continues on. It hasn't stopped yet."

Another incident the following year pushed more of Perry's buttons. "We had a gay brother who was beaten to death in our city and I went to the inquest, and that really was. . .where I consciously became politically active. That was where Howard Efland, a young Jewish brother, was beaten to death by the police in an old hotel in downtown Los Angeles where males used to go for impersonal sex. Supposedly he fell out onto the freeway being taken to the hospital. The police claim he kicked the door open and fell onto the Hollywood Freeway." The verdict: justifiable homicide.

"I've never gotten over that, listening to that story." Perry says, visibly moved as he repeats it. "And I thought, God, there but for the grace of God goes Troy Perry. . . .That was on Good Friday, 1969. That's when I got up in my church and said, 'We have to see the stone of ignorance rolled away from the tomb of truth, and let truth spring forth. . . .'"

In protesting the "Gestapo" tactics of the LAPD, Perry eventually led a demonstration outside the home of Chief Ed Davis, now a state senator whose attitude toward gays has changed. "And I do support Ed Davis," Perry says now, "of all the people running from this district, one of our most conservative districts. Ed has proved to be a friend as time goes by."

Perry also crusaded for gay rights legislation in California and Los Angeles. To this end he undertook his first public fast, which lasted ten days, in June 1970. "I would fast in front of the Federal Building. I discovered one day that was Federal ground and LAPD couldn't come on and arrest me. It would take a federal marshal to arrest me, and we learned how to deal with them--you just call them up and tell them you're gonna do it. You never ask permission."

"It was never fun to fast," he adds. "It hurts a lot, but it reminds you why you're there. . . Don't ever let anybody tell you your stomach quits hurting after three days. That's a lie of the devil."

Perry's longest fast was 16 days, to raise money to fight California's notorious "Briggs Initiative" in 1978. "I announced that I wouldn't eat again until I raised a \$100,000 seed money. . . The Lord had spoken to my heart and told me this was a real moral issue, not the way John Briggs and Anita Bryant were to portray it, and let me know what I was to do. On the sixteenth day of my fast —of just drinking water for 16 days—we went over the top with \$104,000."

This technique may sound dangerously close to Oral Roberts' "God will call me home" extortion, but Perry points out the significant difference: "I said this is a matter of morals. I said, people have to know how serious we are, we who are part of the gay and lesbian community. I refuse to eat again. If it means my death, it means my death."

That's not why Oral did it. Mr. Roberts said God told him "I'll kill you if you don't raise the money." God didn't tell me that. . . This was my offering. . . I knew I would receive the money. I didn't know how long it would take, but I knew with all my heart that the gay community and our heterosexual friends would respond." Abigail van Buren and Jane Fonda were among the "Friends of Troy Perry" who took out full-page ads encouraging donations.

In 1977 Perry was one of 14 lesbians and gay men invited to the White House to discuss our political agenda with Jimmy Carter's assistant, Midge Costanza. Seeing him on television that night resolved the last doubts any of his Southern family had about his homosexuality, he says, and when he visited four months later, "They threw barbecues and fish fries all over the woods. It was like, if I was good enough for the President I must be all right."

It's hard to name a significant event in the gay movement Perry has not been involved in. Phil Donahue has had him on eight times to discuss various issues. "He and I know each other quite well," Perry says. "He and his wife, Marlo Thomas are recipients of our Human Rights award from the MCC this year, and will be in Miami to receive the award on Saturday, July 25. We feel like they have done more for gay rights—in the media—than any person. They've never backed away from the issue and have always been extremely positive."

That award will come during UFMCC's biennial general conference, which will be held July 19-26 in the Deauville, the Miami Beach hotel where Perry led a "lay-in" during the 1972 democratic convention to get an audience with just nominated George McGovern. He learned later that McGovern had been on the way to speak to him when he left.

Besides that conference, which he expects to be "low-keyed," Perry is involved in organizing the October 11 National March. "I feel like we've got to get to Washington, D.C.," he says. "It is time for us to have a much more visible march than the last time. I'm

the one who penned the phrase, 'For love and life, we're not going back.' I based it on a scripture. 'Our God who has given us life, also gives us liberty.'

"The day the Supreme Court ruled that we didn't have any rights, that the states could do anything they wanted against us, I was never so irritated in my life. That's when I said, 'It is now time for another massive demonstration, America.' And I found there were other people feeling just the way I was."

